

Finn Church Aid (FCA) 70th celebration

Courage in the service of peace

Keynote remarks by Adama Dieng

27 September 2017

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour to be here today to celebrate the 70th anniversary of Finn Church Aid and the remarkable work that this organisation does to advance positive change in societies around the world and build sustainable peace.

My special thanks go to all those who have helped to organise this event and facilitated my participation in it. I am particularly grateful to Antti Pentikainen and Mohamed Elsanoussi, the Convener and Director of the Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers. Over the last two years, we have been working very closely with Antti and Mohamed on a process of engagement with religious leaders on their role in preventing incitement to violence. Their advice and expertise has been invaluable. I will speak more about this work later.

The focus of this event on “courage” is one that resonates deeply with me.

As I am sure you may know, one of my roles as the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide is to provide early warning of situations around the world where there is a risk of genocide and related crimes, and to advocate for action to prevent these crimes and protect populations.

In the course of my work, I travel to countries that are of concern to me, because we see early warning signs that these countries may descend into the kind of violence where atrocity crimes may be committed. I meet a great number of people, from Heads of State, to civil society leaders to

witnesses of atrocities. I meet people who have responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of millions of people, and I meet people whose lives have been turned upside down as a result of conflicts that have no part in.

I meet political leaders who are afraid to make the right decision, who lack the courage to take a principled stand – and I meet extraordinary men and women, who show immense courage in the face of extraordinary circumstances. Many of these are civil society activists, individuals who will risk their lives to take a stand and fight for the rights of others. They include journalists, lawyers, human rights activists, community and religious leaders, among others.

Every day in every part of the world, civil society contributes to the advancement of human rights.

A thriving civil society is one of the key elements of a functioning democracy. A diverse and dynamic civil society helps to ensure accountability of political leaders, respect for the rule of law and the inclusion of all populations in decision-making processes.

My office has developed a framework of analysis to guide the assessment of situations for the risk of atrocity crimes – by which we mean genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Framework sets out 14 risk factors for atrocity crimes – and detailed indicators associated with each risk factor. One of those indicators is the absence of a strong, organized and representative national civil society and a free and diverse media. A healthy civil society is critically important for the good health of a society overall.

Because it plays this role, civil society is often one of the first targets of authoritarian regimes, which do not want to be held to account for their actions. In many countries, civil society actors who are standing up for the rights of others are harassed, shut down, arbitrarily imprisoned and, in the worst cases, tortured and killed. Based on current statistics, Honduras, Egypt, the Philippines, Pakistan, Russia and Syria are among the places where activism entails the greatest risks.

The great Nelson Mandela once said that *“I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it.”*

We have seen many examples of this courage. There are many accounts of activists who had the bravery to speak out and take action to advance peace and defend fundamental human rights, despite the risks they face. I have immense respect for these individuals and their work.

I believe, in particular, that speaking out against violence, intolerance and discrimination is never easy, and those who have the courage to do so set an example for all of us.

In this regard, I would like to speak about the case of Mohammad Nourizad, a former hard-line,

conservative, Iranian Shia columnist who changed his views.

As I am sure you know, the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran are the Baha'i, who face persecution and discrimination. Their faith is not officially recognized and is branded as deviant by the Iranian government. Baha'i face arrest if they practice their faith and are discriminated against in all areas of life. Mohammad Nourizad publicly challenged discriminatory practices and legislation against this religious minority, publicly kissing the feet of a four-year-old Baha'i boy whose parents had been arrested for participation in the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education

and posted a photograph of this action on his blog. Nourizad was not afraid of doing what no one else would have dared to do in Iran. By kissing the feet of a Bahai boy, he sent a message of love and respect of freedom of religion and belief that resonated around the world.

Before I joined the United Nations, I worked for many years as head of an international civil society organisation, the International Commission of Jurists. I consider myself first and foremost an activist, an activist with the good fortune to be holding a position within the United Nations that gives me a pulpit. My mandate is a heavy one, but it is also a mandate that gives me an extraordinary opportunity to give a voice to the voiceless and – as they say – “speak truth to power” – to advocate for the protection of the vulnerable with those who have responsibility for their protection.

I receive some of my greatest support from civil society, who provide my office with information and analysis on country situations of concern, connect us with local and regional experts and support the implementation of key programmes of the Office. The reach of the Office is vastly extended through our partnership with civil society organisations.

The Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers is a great example of such a civil society organisation and one of our key partners.

Our partnership began more than two years ago and continues to grow stronger. It started with our decision to engage with religious leaders and actors.

I believe that we have a lot to learn from religious leaders and actors. While some use their influence in a negative way, and misuse religion to advocate hatred and violence, many more use their influence for good, and come out publicly to defend human dignity, call for tolerance and mutual respect, and provide support and aid to those in need. They bring communities together, and in some cases, they are the only ones to provide spiritual and material assistance in the most difficult and dangerous situations, including conflict and humanitarian crises.

In the past few years, we have seen significant attention being paid to the role of religious actors in the field of peace and development, particularly by inter-governmental organisations like the United Nations, World Economic Forum and the World Bank.

In 2012, in a report to the General Assembly, the Secretary-General stressed that “Religious leaders and faith-based organizations play an important mediating role in many conflict situations. These leaders have unique connections to local communities and frequently enjoy the trust of the conflicting parties”, and yet “are often not fully acknowledged, and their potential contribution remains underutilized.”

It was after this that the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers was established in 2013, as a joint effort of Finn Church Aid, the UN Mediation Support Unit, UN Alliance of Civilizations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and Religions for Peace. This initiative is the first of its kind: a global network that consists of religious and traditional leaders and organisations supporting their mediation and peace-building efforts

We are grateful for Finland, and Finn Church Aid’s, continued support for the Network – and here, I would also like to recognise Finland’s appointment of an ambassador at large for intercultural and interreligious dialogue processes, Ambassador Pekka Metso, whom I have had the pleasure to meet and who is with us here today.

The conviction that religious leaders and actors have a key role of play in promoting peace and security led me and my office to engage with these eminent personalities to explore their specific role in preventing incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes.

We launched this process as a result of my grave concern at the increase in the dissemination of hatred and inflammatory speech, especially in situations that were already fragile. In considering this problem, we also considered who we could engage to tackle it and looked at which actors in society have the greatest influence over the behaviour populations – and thus a responsibility to use that influence for good. We decided to hold a series of consultations with religious leaders and actors to draw up a plan of action on the prevention of incitement to violence.

The Plan of Action that resulted was the result of a two-year process of engagement that included consultations with religious leaders and actors in all regions of the world, from different faiths and religions, as well as faith based organisations. It was launched by the Secretary-General at an event this past July in New York.

We heard many stories of courage during these consultations, courage in the service of peace. I was very moved during the consultation with religious leaders from the Africa region to meet and

hear the story a Christian and Muslim leader from northern Nigeria, Pastor Wuye and Imam Ashafa.

For decades, conflict between Christians and Muslims in northern Nigeria has left thousands of people dead, wounded, and homeless.

Pastor Wuye told me that it was a particularly violent clash in the northern town of Zangon-Kataf that brought the two together. Muslims fighters killed Pastor Wuye's bodyguard and cut off the reverend's right arm, leaving him for dead. At the same time, Christian fighters murdered a man who was Imam Ashafa's mentor and spiritual leader. Pastor Wuye's initial reaction at the time was not so different from that of other fighters - vengeance. He wanted to kill Imam Ashafa, one of the leaders of the Muslim militias.

"For three years I nursed the ambition of killing Imam Ashafa," he said, "But then, I attended a program aimed at preaching the gospel to non-Christians, and there I was told by the moderator that you cannot preach Jesus Christ with hate. That reawakened my conscience. I realized that as a Christian, I need to love even when I feel pain." Imam Ashafa heard similar words on forgiveness in his mosque. Both men took the events as a sign from God to collaborate as peacemakers.

They agreed to work out a dialogue promoting mutual understanding and respect. Their work focuses on teaching peace and tolerance to the public – in particular, militant youth, vigilantes and the religious police who enforce Islamic law in some northern states. They also work to achieve signed peace agreements between prominent religious leaders and state or local government. The effort includes working with violent youths through Christian and Islamic teachings that emphasize forgiveness and non-violence. The warmth between these two men, who have received many death threats, warmed my heart, too.

I heard similar stories of courageous action from religious leaders in Central America, where Catholic priests are on the frontline of trying to reduce the drugs-trade related plague of violence – to South Asia.

I was deeply saddened by the murder on 7 September of the Indian human rights activist Gauri Lankesh, who was killed after speaking out against right-wing Hindu extremism and caste-based discrimination in India. She, sadly, is yet another example of how, very often, the courage of activism is silenced with violence.

The Plan of Action that we developed with religious leaders is based on a unifying commitment to promote peace, understanding, mutual respect and the fundamental rights of all people. This includes the rights to freedom of religion and belief, opinion and expression, and peaceful

assembly. The Plan of Action sets out a broad range of ways in which religious leaders can prevent incitement to violence and contribute to peace and stability. It stresses the importance of women and youth in all prevention initiatives. It also contains recommendations for States and the international community.

The United Nations Secretary-General urged the widest possible dissemination and implementation of the Plan of Action which, he said “can help to save lives, reduce suffering, and realize our shared vision of peaceful, inclusive and just societies in which diversity is valued and the rights of all individuals are protected”.

Its implementation will be discussed at a meeting in January 2018. I hope that the Government of Finland will be represented at this important meeting.

Dear friends,

I am very appreciative for the contribution the Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers provided to the development of the Plan of Action. The Network provided advice and support throughout the process. I am also particularly thankful to the Network as it had the courage to share my conviction - that at the heart of all religions is the belief in our common humanity and respect for “the other”. Together we have succeeded in placing a discussion about the positive power of religion at the heart of the work of the United Nations.

I consider this to be a huge achievement.

However, we still have a lot of work in front of us. The implementation of the Plan of Action opens up opportunities for an enhanced collaboration between our respective institutions. In this regard, I trust the Network will continue to support my office during the implementation phase of the Plan of Action.

Distinguished guests,

It is my firmest belief that examples of individual courage offer a unique opportunity to learn and reflect about our potential to defend human dignity.

The people we have heard about should become our role models, our champions, and guide our actions. These examples also show that courage is not a prerogative of a few individuals only; it is a treasure that is hidden within each of us. Courage does not need a big stage to perform well; it can blossom in our offices, our homes, our neighbourhoods. Wherever it is evident, it can have a positive impact on the lives of the people around us.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I conclude my remarks, I would like to reiterate that it is through acts of courage in the service of peace that we can bring about societies premised on inclusion, equality and the rule of law. Let us all have the courage to speak out and take action in defence of peace and fundamental human rights.

I will stop here. Thank you very much for listening.